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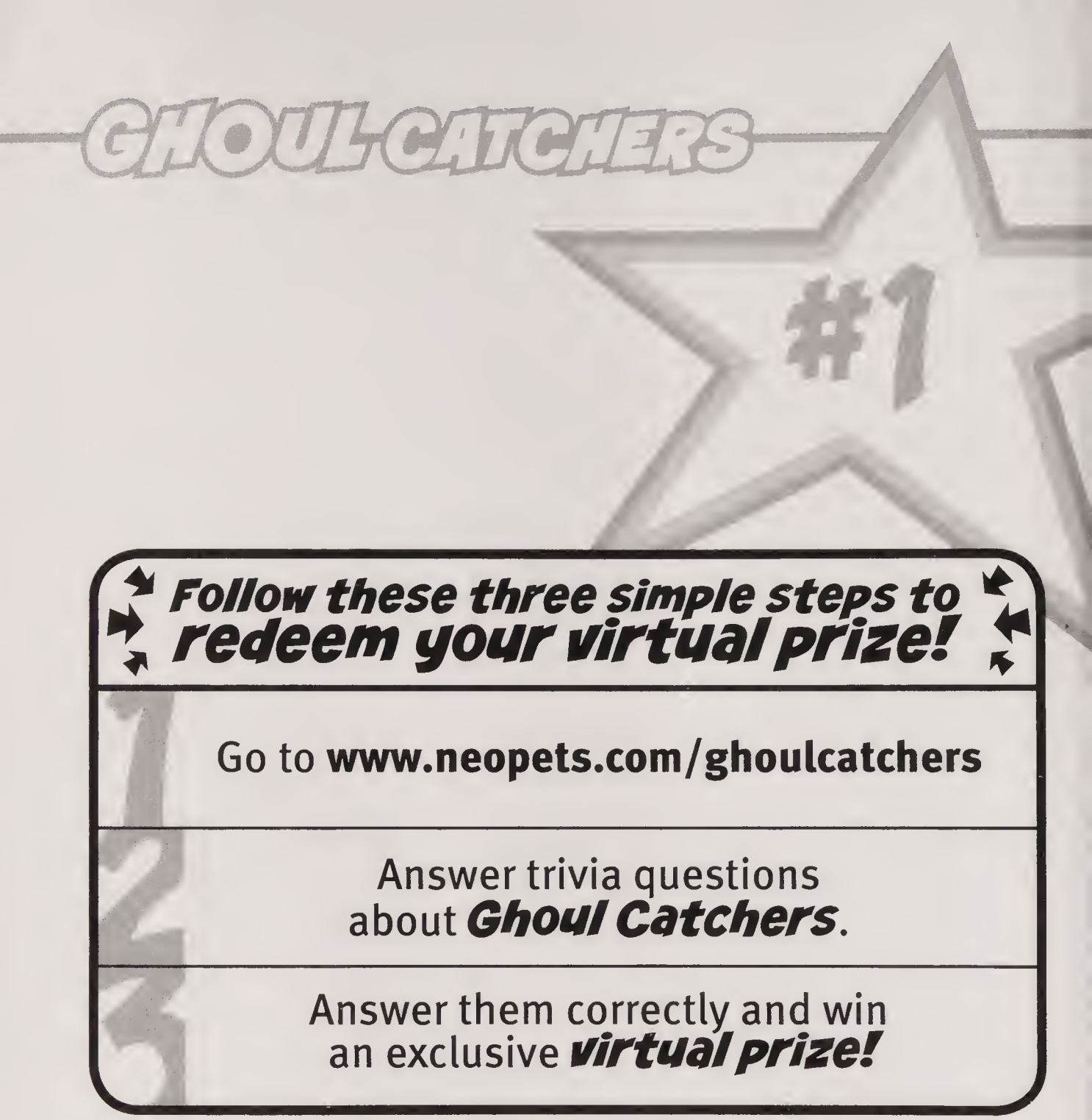

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Ghoul Catchers: The Creeping Danger

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First Edition

PROLOGUE

Long ago a small group of Neopets decided to dabble in dark magic. As a result, they discovered that by tapping into this potent but dangerous source of power, they could grow strong—stronger, in fact, than they ever dreamed possible.

In time their magical abilities flourished. But their newfound power came with a price. Before long it corrupted and blinded them, so that their quest to grow stronger and to dominate all they encountered became an obsession.

As their desire for power took over their entire beings, it crowded out any goodness that once dwelled within them. Their kindness, compassion, and respect for others and for the beautiful land in which they lived soon became nothing more than a vague memory. The Neopets became ghouls—corrupt, evil shadows of their former selves, with but one all-consuming goal: to gain control over all of Neopia.

The ghouls eventually mastered the art of sucking the life force out of Neopets. This increased their own strength and left the Neopets they attacked frozen, like statues. With each Neopet they drained, the health of the land suffered as well, slowly transforming once lush and green landscapes into barren, lifeless wastelands. And each attack made the ghouls more powerful, bringing them one step closer to the total domination of Neopia.

Reacting to this crisis, a brave band of ghoul catchers, led by Professor Vinsjin, a world-

renowned teacher, writer, and ghoul catcher, set out to hunt down and stop the ghouls. In time, the professor created a magical spell that banished the ghouls to a mystical realm—a realm not inhabited by Neopets, a realm in between worlds.

Following the banishment of the ghouls, the effects of their dark magic slowly wore off and eventually Neopia returned to normal. Flowers bloomed, rivers ran, and the frozen Neopets regained their life forces and resumed their lives, unharmed. Everyone assumed that the ghouls were gone forever. . . .

But everyone was wrong!

Gnawthral, the leader of the ghouls, drifted through the mist. A Quiggle from the Ice Caves of Terror Mountain, Gnawthral had rough, green skin which covered his wide, thick body. Sharp black nails extended from his fingers. All that was visible within his jet-black eyes

was a thin line of red, like a strip of coal burning in his skull.

He had been trapped in this in-between realm forever. Or was it merely seconds? Time had no meaning in this place between reality and dreams. Gnawthral stared up into the bleak mist and spotted a faint glow of light. The light grew brighter, then suddenly tore a gash in the sky, creating a glowing portal shimmering in the mist.

Gnawthral's eyes opened wide in astonishment. Through this hole in the sky he caught a brief glimpse of the colorful world of Neopia, a stark contrast to the bleak, endless grey that had surrounded him since his banishment.

Then Gnawthral spotted something tumbling toward him from Neopia, heading right for the portal. *A weapon?* he wondered. *Some kind of attack?*

Then the object drew closer as it passed through the tear in the sky and approached

the ghoul. *A book! Could it be . . .*

Gnawthral reached out a gnarled green hand and snatched the book from the air with his long fingers. His coal black eyes opened wide at the realization of what he now held in his twisted grip. He recognized the book instantly. His agile mind raced.

This is the key! he thought. *The way out—or more accurately, the way back in—to Neopia!* An evil smile spread across his thin blue lips.

Gnawthral quickly gathered together the other ghouls that had been banished with him. "The time has come, my friends," Gnawthral snarled, slowly opening the book. "We are going home."

CHAPTER ONE

"Come on, Sarn. Jump!" shouted a young Wocky to her best friend.

"I don't know, Liva," the nervous Kacheek replied from the cliff that hung above the Old Swimming Hole, his blue and white tail twitching.

"You promised!" Liva called up from the water below. She floated just above the surface, her pointy ears raised and alert, her soft brown eyes looking up at her friend.

Sarn looked down at the beautiful crystal-

clear pool formed by the high rock wall of the quarry. He and Liva had been swimming at the quarry pool many times.

Being a Wocky, Liva lived for adventure. She never hesitated to jump into the deep, sparkling water from the outcropping, which everyone in their village called the "jumping-off point."

"I know I promised, Liva," Sarn said, taking a step back. "But that was yesterday."

"Promises don't come with expiration dates, silly," Liva replied patiently. She knew he would do it eventually. He just needed a little encouragement. "Just step off and join me in the water. It's really nice in here. And I think I saw a Rainbow Primella fish swim by. You know they're your favorite!"

Reluctantly, Sarn took off his glasses and placed them on the ground.

"Okay, here I go!" he shouted.

SPLASH!

Sarn plunged into the cool water. Even before

he had surfaced, a huge smile spread across his face. Breaking the surface, Sarn shook his head, flinging water from his thick fur and spraying it in all directions.

"Told you!" Liva said when Sarn swam up next to her. "Nothing to it!"

"Yeah," Sarn agreed, looking up at the shimmering silver leaves quaking in the towering trees that surrounded the pool. "Nothing to it."

Sarn felt something brush up against his leg. "What was that?" he cried, pulling his legs up and wrapping his tail around them, scrunching his small body into a tight ball. "Was it an Arkmite?!"

"No, silly, I told you," Liva replied, rolling her eyes. "It's a Rainbow Primella fish. You like them. Remember?"

"Cool!" exclaimed Sarn. Then the Rainbow Primella darted away, vanishing from view.

"Come on, I have to get back to the glen. Grandfather is expecting me," Liva said as she stepped from the pool. She shook the water from

her matted orange fur, then stood up tall.

Sarn retrieved his glasses, and he and Liva made their way up out of the quarry and into a lush meadow. Soft grass swayed in the breeze and a rainbow of flowers seemed to spread out forever. As they crossed the meadow, Sarn and Liva gathered flowers of all sizes and colors.

"You know how Grandfather likes his fresh flowers," Liva said, plucking a long yellow iris from its stem.

"It's just not a day without fresh flowers, young ones!" Sarn said in a deep, gruff voice.

"Don't let him hear you do that!" Liva warned. "I'd never hear the end of it."

"*You'd* never hear the end of it!" Sarn exclaimed. "What about me? I'm not sure he even likes me."

"Oh, he likes you," Liva said, snatching up a huge sunflower to complete her bouquet. "He just likes to give you a hard time because you're a little shy."

"He doesn't think I'm a little shy," Sarn said, as they reached the point where the meadow ended and the Haunted Woods began. "He thinks I'm not brave enough." Sarn caught sight of the dark woods and stopped.

"You're a lot braver than when I first met you, Sarn," Liva said, smiling. "Remember? You wouldn't even cross the meadow because it ended here at the Haunted Woods."

"But you were *always* brave, Liva."

"Hey, I'm a Wocky! Brave is what we do!"

"I'm not afraid to come this close to the Haunted Woods now," Sarn said proudly.

"Then I bet you're not afraid to . . . CLIMB THAT TREE! Last one up has to comb Grandfather's beard!"

Liva dashed to the base of an enormous oak tree that stood like a sentry at the edge of the woods. Launching herself into the air, she leaped up to the first branch, grabbed it with her front paws, then pulled herself up onto the next branch.

"Oh, no! I'm not combing your grandfather's beard!" Sarn shouted. "He's always got jumbleberry pie crumbs in there. Yuck!" Before he had time to remember that he was terrified of heights—or to realize that he was about to climb a tree that was technically *in* the Haunted Woods—Sarn raced after Liva and jumped up into the old enormous tree.

Sarn was an excellent climber. He caught the first branch with his back legs then wrapped his tail around a higher branch and swung himself up, shooting right past Liva. In seconds he had reached the top of the towering tree.

"Yeah!" Sarn said boldly. "I climbed a tree in the . . . in the . . ." Then it dawned on him what he had actually just done. "In the Haunted Woods. . . ." His voice trailed away.

From his perch atop the great oak Sarn gazed out at the thick, dark expanse of the Haunted Woods, the scariest place in all of Neopia. Ancient trees filled the woods, their leaves

rustling ominously with just the slightest breeze. On the mossy forest floor below, something skittered among the dead leaves and twisted fallen branches, and Sarn suddenly got very cold.

"Time to climb down!" he announced. "Wouldn't want to keep Grandfather waiting!" He scrambled down the tree even faster than he had climbed up. A few seconds later, Liva joined him on the ground.

"Come on, you brave Kacheek, you," Liva said. The two friends followed the nearby narrow trail as it veered away from the Haunted Woods and led right to the village of Berkshire Glen.

Soon they approached a weathered brown hut built from blocks of dried clay dug from the surrounding hills. The hut was covered by a thatched roof woven together from dried water reeds and rushes from the nearby Demonica River. The familiar column of smoke rose from the chimney and a large pile of firewood sat stacked neatly beside the front door.

"Grandfather, I'm here!" Liva announced, throwing open the small front door. Liva's grandfather, Cramdill, was quite old. No one knew exactly how old, but there were few Wockys, or Neopets of any kind for that matter, who had lived in the village longer.

Cramdill lived alone and was perfectly happy doing so. But Liva made a point of stopping by at least once a day to visit him, a time they both greatly enjoyed.

"Come in, young one. Come in!" Cramdill shouted, waving his hand toward the kitchen. "Oh, I see you brought that Kacheek with you."

"He's not 'that Kacheek,' Grandfather," Liva said with a laugh. "You know my best friend, Sarn."

"I know him, all right!" Cramdill replied, stroking his long red beard. Jumbleberry pie crumbs flew out, bouncing onto the floor. "He's the young one who's afraid of his own shadow!"

"Sarn's gotten much braver, Grandfather," Liva explained. "He used to be afraid of most things, when he was little. Now, he's almost as brave as a Wocky."

"Ha! Brave as a Wocky, my beard!" Cramdill grumbled.

Liva reached up and picked a crumb from Cramdill's beard. "Besides, I've got a real adventure planned for us tomorrow," she added.

"Adventure?" Sarn asked anxiously.

"Yup," Liva replied. "Tomorrow we are going for a hike in the Haunted Woods!"

Cramdill's eyes opened wide. He leaned in close to Liva, concern showing on his wrinkled face. "The Haunted Woods?" he asked softly. "You will be careful, won't you, Liva?"

"Don't worry, Grandfather," Liva replied, taking his hand in hers. "Everything's going to be fine."

Sarn felt a knot growing in his stomach.

A moment ago Cramdill had been making fun of him for being afraid. But as soon as Liva said that *she* would be going into the Haunted Woods, his mood seemed to change suddenly. What was in those woods? For better or worse, Sarn would find out tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWO

That night, Sarn tried to sleep, but he couldn't get his mind off of the next day's adventure. "It's just a hike," he said to himself, trying to find the courage that Liva seemed to come by naturally. *Yeah, but it's in the Haunted Woods!* he immediately thought, and his stomach started to hurt again.

"Maybe sleeping isn't such a great idea," Sarn muttered. He got out of bed and grabbed a bowl of jumbleberries from the pantry. Then he stared out the window at the vast night sky,

counting the stars. One by one he popped the sweet orange berries into his mouth, wishing that the morning would never come.

But, of course, it did. The sun crept over the rooftops of the little village and found Sarn fast asleep. He awoke with a start and discovered his hand stuck in the bowl of jumbleberries.

Sarn washed up and brushed his fur. *I don't know why I'm bothering,* he thought. *The monsters waiting for me in the Haunted Woods aren't going to care what I look like, as long as I taste good!*

But Sarn still headed off to meet Liva at the edge of their village beside the meadow.

"Morning, Sarn," Liva said, waving. "Ready for a day of adventure?"

"Listen, about the whole adventure thing," Sarn began, hoping he could find the right words to talk Liva out of this hike, all the while knowing that no matter what he said, it wouldn't work. "What if we took our hike next week?"

"It's going to be fine, Sarn," Liva replied,

squeezing his shoulder. "Nothing bad has happened in the Haunted Woods for years. Trust me. Think of it as just going for a little stroll."

"It's just a little stroll," Sarn repeated, trying to convince himself.

"Ready?" Liva asked. She started into the woods without waiting for a reply.

Sarn took a deep breath, then followed.

As the tall forest canopy closed in around them, the bright morning sun gave way to a gloomy darkness. Within seconds it felt as if they had stepped from morning into late afternoon, followed by the eerie shadows of dusk.

Sarn stayed close to Liva as the path they walked grew narrower, the trees more densely packed. A soft chorus of Moaches started up.

"Moaches? During the day?" Sarn asked.

The steady chirp of Moaches was a regular part of the evenings in their village. Sarn usually found their sound comforting as night settled in—

once he was safely at home, of course. But now, their rhythmic cries sent chills along his tail.

"I guess it's always night in the Haunted Woods," Liva explained. "Cool, huh?"

"Yeah," Sarn replied, swallowing hard. "Cool."

The woods fell silent for a moment, then the chorus of sounds picked up, growing louder and louder.

"Is that enough of a stroll, Liva?" Sarn asked, turning around, hoping that might persuade Liva to head back out of the woods.

"We're just getting started, silly," Liva said, grasping Sarn's hand and gently turning him around. "Besides, I haven't found a rainbow morning flower yet. No trip to the Haunted Woods is complete without spotting one."

"B-but the trail?" Sarn sputtered.

"The trail leads this way," Liva said, pointing and leading Sarn deeper into the woods.

"Look!" Liva shouted excitedly. "There's one!

A rainbow morning flower!" She raced ahead and bent down to inspect a tiny flower growing from the base of a tree. The delicate bloom shimmered with the light of many colors. "It's beautiful, isn't it, Sarn?"

Sarn nodded. *Well, that's one nice thing in these horrible woods.*

"I'm going to pick it for you," Liva said, pinching the stem and plucking the flower from the tree. As she handed the flower to Sarn, its glow faded. The long, fingerlike petals turned black and fell off, one by one. "Uh, maybe I shouldn't have picked it."

"Maybe we shouldn't have come," Sarn added. "Let's go home."

"What, and miss that!?" Liva exclaimed, pointing to her right.

Sarn turned and saw what Liva was looking at. There, seemingly growing right out of the forest floor, stood an old house, though how much longer it would be standing was anyone's

guess. Its windows were cracked, the roof had a huge hole in it, and pieces of the wooden clapboard dangled from rusty nails. The whole place leaned to the left and looked as if a strong wind would blow it right over.

"You want to go in *there*?!?" Sarn asked, instinctively backing away.

"Are you kidding?" Liva cried, hurrying toward the creepy house. "That place has 'adventure' written all over it! It could be a haunted house! How cool is that!"

"Looks more like it should have 'condemned' written all over it!" Sarn shot back.

Liva ignored Sarn and stepped up to the front door. Not ready to turn back and walk all the way home by himself, the young Kacheek had no choice but to follow.

"I'm here with you, Sarn," Liva said reassuringly, taking his hand. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I promise."

"There's no expiration date on that promise,

right?" Sarn asked, managing a small smile.

"Right. Now come on. Let's see if the front door is locked."

Liva reached out and grasped the rusty metal doorknob. It came right off in her hand. The front door swung open, making a creaking noise that made Sarn's fur stand on end.

"Guess it's not locked," Liva said, stepping inside.

Sarn poked his head through the door. His feet felt as if they had been glued to the ground.

"Come in," Liva called out. "There's nothing in here but a bunch of old furniture and a ton of cobwebs."

Sarn finally managed to drag himself through the doorway. As soon as he was inside, the door slammed shut behind him. "Who did that?" Sarn cried.

"Must have been the wind," Liva suggested.

"What wind!?" Sarn exclaimed.

"The same wind that's causing those curtains

to move." Liva pointed to the wall, where a set of long black velvet curtains fluttered up and down.

Sarn peeked behind the curtains. "Liva! There's no window behind these curtains. Where is the wind coming from?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"It's so dark in here," Sarn said, following Liva to a set of stairs.

"Ta-da!" Liva exclaimed, picking up an oil lamp from the cobweb-covered fireplace mantle. "Light!"

She blew on the front of the lamp to clear away the dust, which billowed up into her face, sending Liva into a coughing fit.

Carefully, Liva lit the lamp and a faint beam of light extended from it. "This will have to do. Come on."

The two friends crept up the creaking stairs. Each step sagged a bit beneath their weight and Sarn feared that his foot would go crashing right through.

Suddenly a vague shape, more shadow than substance, raced past them, along the wall.

"Liva! I don't think we should be here!" Sarn whispered hoarsely as his eyes tried to follow the path of the shadow. Then he heard a loud whooshing noise explode from downstairs. Looking back down the stairs, he saw a raging fire fill the ancient fireplace. The fire had erupted from out of nowhere, roaring in a fireplace that probably hadn't been used in decades.

Without another word, Sarn rushed up the stairs, pushing past Liva. He stood on the second-floor landing in the dark. "Liva!" he yelped.

"Right here," she said, joining him on the second floor. "You might want to wait for the light before you go charging up a dark set of stairs."

"Did you see that fire?"

"Yeah. Where did that come from?" Liva asked, swallowing hard.

Sarn squatted and looked back down the stairs. The fire was gone, along with any sign of

smoke or ash. Could it have been all in his mind? But no, Liva had seen it, too.

Walking slowly down the sloping corridor, lead only by the faint light from the oil lamp, they came to a door at the end of the hall. "If we're going to go any farther we have to open this door," Liva pointed out.

"So then, we go no farther, right?"

"Sarn. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I think I left it back in my room. Why don't I go get it?"

"It's just a door."

Liva opened the door, sweeping her light around in a circle, and saw that they were at the top of another set of stairs. This one led down to what she could only assume was the basement.

"Should we go down?" she asked, extending her lamp toward the darkness below.

"There's nothing in the world that could get me to go down those stairs!" Sarn said firmly.

A loud crash suddenly sounded behind them.

Sarn rushed past Liva and raced down the stairs. *"Nothing in the world," huh?* Liva thought. Then she followed Sarn down into the dark basement.

The room had no windows and the dim light coming from Liva's lamp was fading quickly.

Something moved in the darkness, skittering across the floor. Liva whipped her light around in time to catch a glimpse of something bumping into a small table and knocking over a glass jar filled with thick, green liquid. The jar rolled off the table and crashed to the floor, releasing a sickening odor that made their eyes burn.

When it moved again, Liva saw that it wasn't actually a "thing," as she had first thought—it was a fellow Neopet! But something was just not right about it. That's when the oil lamp went out.

"Liva! Turn it back on! Turn it back on!"

"Just a second!" she cried. "It's gone dead!"

"Don't use that word!" Sarn shouted. He groped in darkness for the stairs. When his hand touched the bottom step, he scrambled up, practically crawling, tripping over Liva a few times before finally reaching the door. "Open it!"

"Wait!" Liva yelled, finally managing to get the oil lamp relit.

The light blazed back on, revealing an Eyrie blocking the door. But something was very odd about this Eyrie. His body was pale bluish grey and seemed to float in the air before them. She could see right through him to the door.

Too terrified to think, Sarn gave himself over to pure animal instinct. He dropped down, scrambled between the Eyrie's legs, picked himself up and lunged for the door. His heart pounding, Sarn dashed down the hallway and back down the stairs. With Liva close behind, he raced for the front door.

Grabbing the door handle, he glanced back

over his shoulder and saw the Eyrie closing in on them. He seemed to glide rather than run across the floor.

OOO-eeeee!! the Eyrie screeched, practically on top of Sarn.

"It's a ghost!" Liva shouted. "Run, Sarn!"

Sarn turned back around and got a face full of cobwebs. He clutched at his face, trying to tear the sticky mess away so he could find the door, but he stumbled and went down hard. Liva ran fast to catch up with Sarn, but tripped over him, and landed face-first on the floor. The two friends huddled together just inches from the front door. But the exit might as well have been a mile away. They weren't going to reach the door in time.

CHAPTER THREE

The ghostly Eyrie towered over the two terrified Neopets. He stood up on his hind legs and spread his majestic wings. Then he leaned in for a closer look at his prey.

"Oh, you're just kids!" the ghost said, sighing with relief. "I thought you were them! I thought they had come back."

"Thought we were who?" Liva asked as she struggled to calm her breathing.

But the ghost had already floated away across the room. "Lock the doors!" he shouted.

"Quickly! They could be anywhere!"

"But the doorknob fell off!" Liva explained. "What are you so scared of?"

"Yeah!" Sarn added, feeling a little less frightened upon seeing how terrified the ghost was. "You're even more scared than I am. Besides, you're the ghost. You're supposed to be the one scaring everyone else!"

The ghost turned toward Sarn and leaned in close. "BOO!" he shouted. Sarn jumped back and scooted around behind Liva. "There, are you happy now?"

"Will you please tell us what's going on?" Liva asked.

The ghost hurried to a window and peered out through its jagged glass into the dark woods beyond. "I suppose we have time," he said. "Though not much. Very well."

The ghost folded his wings and brought his paws together as he gathered his thoughts. Then he launched into an astonishing story.

"My name is Kyrok," he began. "And yes, I am a ghost. Recently I was imprisoned in this house by ghouls. They put a spell on me to prevent me from passing through walls and other solid objects—something I usually have no problem doing."

"G-g-ghouls?" Sarn stammered, his tail twitching.

"Yes, ghouls who were long ago banished from Neopia, but have now returned to complete what they began all those years ago," Kyrok explained.

"And what is it they hope to complete?" Liva asked anxiously.

"The complete takeover of Neopia," Kyrok said softly. Liva thought she heard a touch of sadness mixed in with the fear in Kyrok's voice.

"How would they do that?" Sarn asked. He was genuinely curious, and his mind couldn't quite grasp the enormity of what the ghost was saying.

"Through their powerful dark magic they have gained the ability to freeze Neopets and draw the life force from them. Although the Neopets remain alive, they cannot move. Each time the ghouls do this, they grow stronger and the life force of Neopia itself is drained, until the land is destroyed."

"You said they were banished. To where?" Liva asked.

"Many years ago, a brave band of ghoul hunters, led by Professor Vinsjin used a magical spell to banish the ghouls to a mystical realm. There they remained until Professor Vinsjin's diary fell into the hands of the ghouls. The book not only contains the original spell used to banish the ghouls, but also enough information to show the ghouls how to return to Neopia."

"How long have they been back in Neopia?" Liva asked.

"A few weeks, maybe a couple of months.

Not long," Kyrok explained. "They only imprisoned me here a few days ago so I would be here when their leader arrived. He is coming back for me, I am certain of that. That's why I was so nervous when I saw you two."

"Why you?" Liva asked.

Kyrok's faint blue-grey complexion turned even paler. "I knew of them. I was aware of their banishment and their return. And so I posed a threat to them. I could spread the word that they had returned. And so they trapped me here. And I'm afraid you two are now trapped as well!"

"Trapped?" Sarn asked sharply, sticking close to Liva.

"What do you mean?" Liva asked. "Why would we be trapped?"

"The spell the ghouls cast to keep me here was also placed on the house," Kyrok explained. "And the two of you are now in the house. Therefore, the spell has been cast on you, too!"

Sarn scratched his head. "But we got in, didn't we?" he pointed out, wishing that they had never set foot in this place.

"Hmm," Kyrok replied, rubbing his beak. "True."

"What if the opposite is true?" Liva asked. "What if because we can leave, you can also leave?"

Before Kyrok answered, Liva reached out, grabbed the edge of the front door, and swung it open. She stepped outside, followed closely by Sarn.

Kyrok hesitated.

"Come on," Liva urged the ghost. "Just walk out of there. You don't want to just stay in the house and wait for the ghouls to come back, do you?"

Kyrok shook his head, took a deep breath, and stepped through the door. "Very clever . . . uh . . . um . . . ," he said once he was outside.

"Liva. My name is Liva, and this is Sarn."

"Good thinking. Both of you," Kyrok said. "That spell must have been broken when you two entered the house."

"Good thing we were here, then," Liva said.

"Yes," Kyrok agreed. "Thank you. Now we must prepare for our journey."

"*Our* journey!" Sarn cried. "What do you mean, *our* journey?"

"Sounds like an adventure to me!" Liva said, warming to the idea.

"Adventure!" Sarn shouted. "Walking in the Haunted Woods is an adventure. Jumping into the quarry pool is an adventure. This is . . . is . . . crazy! I wish I had never heard about all this."

Kyrok glared at Sarn, who cowered behind Liva.

"Once the last Neopet has been frozen, and the last land stripped of all life, there will be no turning back," Kyrok said ominously. "This world we all love will become a barren wasteland

presided over by powerful, all-controlling ghouls who wish to populate Neopia with their own kind."

"I didn't even want to come into the Haunted Woods in the first place," Sarn cried. "And I don't want to go on some ghoul-hunting quest! I just want to go home."

"But you heard what Kyrok said," Liva replied. "If we don't do this there won't be any home to go back to!"

Sarn turned away and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Besides, what did I promise you, Sarn?" Liva asked softly.

"That you wouldn't let anything happen to me," Sarn replied, turning back around. Somehow he already knew that he wasn't going to win this argument. "But I thought you were only talking about the Haunted Woods and this creepy old house." Then he turned to Kyrok. "No offense," he added.

Kyrok grinned. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll look out for you."

"You see," Liva jumped right in. "That's two of us. You'll be fine."

"So, what is it we have to do?" Sarn asked, barely believing that the words had come out of his mouth.

"We must find Gnawthral, leader of the ghouls, get back the secret diary in his possession, and use the knowledge contained in the diary to send the ghouls back into banishment."

"Oh, is that all?" Sarn asked as he followed Liva and Kyrok away from the house and deeper into the Haunted Woods. "And I thought it was going to be something hard!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Sarn trudged along behind Liva and Kyrok, wondering how he had gotten himself into this mess.

Liva, on the other hand, seemed to think this whole quest was just one big adventure. "Where are we headed?" she asked excitedly.

"We will not be able to battle Gnawthral and his minions without some magic of our own," Kyrok explained. "We must journey to the Witch's Tower and speak with Edna the Witch. We must alert her to the danger and persuade

her to create magic potions for us."

As they traveled deeper into the Haunted Woods, the trees grew closer together and darkness enveloped them like a thick blanket. Howls and screeches came suddenly, building to a deafening chorus, then stopped just as quickly, leaving an eerie, unnatural silence behind.

"The Witch's Tower is in a clearing just ahead," Kyrok said. "Follow me."

The group walked single file along a narrow pathway between the trees. They soon came to a small clearing beside a huge hole in the forest floor. Black, tarlike muck oozed and bubbled from the bottom of the hole. The rancid smell was overpowering.

Kyrok gasped in horror. "The ghouls have been here."

"How do you know?" Liva asked.

"This used to be a pond, filled with sparkling, clear water," Kyrok said bitterly. "It teemed with life—Cobralls, Greebles, Nuranna. Now the

life force has been drained by the ghouls. Look closely, my friends. This is but a small preview of what all of Neopia will look like if we fail in our task. Now come, the Witch's Tower is around the bend on the far side of the clearing."

The two friends followed Kyrok across the clearing. Bearing right, they came to a huge circular clearing. Kyrok stopped short and his bold blue eyes opened wide.

"It's gone!" he cried.

"Gone?" Liva asked, confused. "What's gone?"

"The Witch's Tower. It has stood here in this circle for thousands of years." Kyrok's eyes narrowed. "Something is not right. Gnawthral is powerful, but he can't eliminate an entire castle."

Kyrok stepped toward the circle and his body slammed into an invisible barrier. White bolts of magical energy shot through him like lightning. In the brilliant flashing, Sarn and

Liva could see the bones of Kyrok's skeleton. They could also see something else.

Illuminated by the flashing energy was a tall tower. Its grey stone walls rose to a circular turret. Its windows were cut into the shape of brooding eyes, the door a gaping mouth. Through these openings, Liva and Sarn caught flashes of a sickly green glow. Two smaller branches of the tower extended out on either side of the main structure, bending upward like two flexed arms about to strike.

"That must be the Witch's Tower!" Liva cried. "It's here. We just can't see it."

Kyrok stepped back, breathing hard, and the flashing stopped. The circle was once again empty. Or so it appeared.

"It seems that Gnawthral has cast a cloaking spell over the tower," Kyrok explained. "And he has erected an energy barrier. None can pass in or out. I suspect that Edna the Witch is trapped inside, which will put her in a very foul mood—

even more foul than usual.

"Is there any way to reverse the spell and free Edna?" Liva asked.

"I'm afraid not. This energy barrier is very powerful—even more so than the simple spell put on my house—and will be reversed only when Gnawthral is once again banished from Neopia."

Kyrok's eyes opened wide. "But there is one who may know of a closer source of magic. We must consult the Brain Tree!" Kyrok exclaimed.

"What's a Brain Tree?" Sarn asked.

"It is the only tree to ever develop intelligence," Kyrok explains. "It thirsts for knowledge, and over the years it has come to know many things. But it doesn't share that knowledge willingly. It always tests those who ask him for information."

"What kind of test?" Liva asked.

"Riddles," Kyrok said. "It adores riddles. It believes that solving riddles helps the brain grow.

And it may be right. When you see the size of its brain you'll understand."

"I love riddles!" Sarn said, his face brightening. "We Kacheeks love riddles and puzzles, and we're very good at solving them."

Kyrok tilted his head to one side and raised an eyebrow. "Really?" he asked, the astonishment evident in his voice. "Very well, then. We will count on you to solve the Brain Tree's riddles and obtain the information we need."

"Count on me?" Sarn asked, swallowing hard. It was one thing to solve riddles for fun, but he suddenly felt responsible for the success of their quest. The weight of all of Neopia now rested squarely on his tiny shoulders.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Relax, Sarn," Liva said, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You've answered lots of riddles. You're really good at them."

"Yeah, Liva, but there's never been so much at stake before."

"You'll do fine. Besides, it's a tree that's going to be asking you questions. How tough can they be?"

Kyrok led the two friends through the dense forest, stepping over twisted roots and around piles of rocks, picking his way through

the overgrown woodland. After a while the trees they passed got smaller until they were nothing more than spindly saplings and scrawny bushes.

"What happened to all the trees here?" Liva asked. "Have the ghouls been here, too?"

"No. We are very close to the Brain Tree," Kyrok explained. "To sustain its great power and size the Brain Tree draws all the energy, water, and nutrients to itself. Nothing else stands a chance of growing very well near it."

"How big is it?" Sarn asked.

"See for yourself," Kyrok replied.

Sarn looked up at the biggest tree he had ever seen. Its trunk was as thick as a house and its branches seemed to touch the clouds. About a third of the way up, two brilliant red eyes sat above a large, cavernous mouth.

The top two-thirds of the tree was made of an enormous brain. The living mass pulsated as if it were breathing.

Kyrok stood up straight and spread his wings wide. "Brain Tree, we have come seeking knowledge," he announced in a loud, firm voice.

As if it had been awakened from a deep slumber, the Brain Tree suddenly took notice of the threesome. Its red eyes glowed and focused on the pale blue Eyrie.

"Brain Tree, do you know where we can find a source of magic other than Edna the Witch?" Kyrok asked.

The Brain Tree's eyes darkened and its mouth closed tightly. It appeared that it was deep in thought. After a few minutes, its eyes glowed once again and it spoke. "I am aware of another source," it announced.

"That's great!" Sarn cried.

"But before I reveal that source, I need my question answered!"

"Here comes the riddle," Liva whispered. Sarn nodded and prepared himself.

"Very well," Kyrok agreed. "We will answer your question."

"The question is, a cloud is my mother, the wind is my father, a cool stream is my son, and my daughter is the fruit of the land. Who am I?"

Sarn rubbed his eyes and began to walk in a circle around the Brain Tree. He found that this sometimes helped him think. "A cloud is my mother. The wind is my father." He looked up at the windblown clouds passing overhead. "A cool stream is my son, and—"

SPLASH!

Looking up at the sky, Sarn had stepped into a small stream that ran beside the Brain Tree. At first he was annoyed as he shook the water off his foot, but then Sarn smiled broadly.

"Rain!" he shouted triumphantly. "The answer is rain. It comes from the wind and clouds, fills up streams, and makes fruit grow on the land."

"Correct," the Brain Tree said. "You have done well."

Sarn beamed as Liva gave him a hug.

"Well done, Sarn," Kyrok added, smiling for the first time since Sarn had met him. "Well done."

"Here is the knowledge you seek," the Brain Tree boomed. "Follow the trail to the Deserted Fairground. Where the mountain rises from the forest and descends once again you will see a cave—the cave of the magician Quonsar. He has not been seen in Neopia for many years, but he was strong in the ways of magic and you may find what you seek deep within his cave."

Without saying another word, the Brain Tree's eyes went dull, and its mouth closed firmly. It had gone back to sleep until the next knowledge seeker sought out its help.

"It's not big on good-byes, is it?" Liva asked, as Kyrok pointed in the direction of the Deserted Fairground.

"Time to go," Kyrok said abruptly. "We must find that cave."

As the travelers headed away from the Brain Tree, the trees got bigger and the forest closed in around them once again.

"Stop!" Kyrok whispered suddenly, holding out his paw. "There's someone up ahead. It looks like a group of Neopets. Quickly, into these bushes!"

Sarn and Liva dove into a cluster of bushes to hide.

"Wait here," Kyrok ordered.

"Where are you going?" Sarn asked in a panic. "You're not leaving us alone, are you?"

"I'm going to see who is up ahead. Just sit tight."

Sarn and Liva watched in amazement as Kyrok simply vanished. One second he was standing right there, the next he was invisible. They saw the impression made by his feet as he walked away toward the group of strangers.

"And I was feeling so brave a minute ago," Sarn moaned, trying to keep his twitching tail

from rattling the bushes and giving away their location. "What if those are the ghouls? What if they freeze us and take our life force, or whatever it was that Kyrok was talking about?"

"We don't know who they are, Sarn," Liva replied. "Let's just wait and see what Kyrok finds out."

Just then, Kyrok returned.

"What's going on?" Liva asked.

"It's a group of Neopets who have been frozen by the ghouls," Kyrok explained. "This means that the ghouls have been here already. We must hurry. Come!"

Liva and Sarn followed Kyrok along the narrow path. Sarn's heart was pounding so hard he thought it might leap from his chest. They soon came to a group of about fifteen Neopets who stood together like a cluster of statues.

Sarn saw Wockys and Usuls and Xweetoks, all unable to move. They looked pale and exhausted, as if they hadn't slept in days. Sarn thought he

recognized a few as being from his village.

"Help us!" pleaded a young Xweetok.

"You can speak!" Liva cried out in surprise.

"Explain to us what happened here," Kyrok said to the young Xweetok.

"The ghouls came storming into Berkshire Glen, our village just outside the Haunted Woods," the Xweetok began. His voice sounded strained and tired, as if it took great effort to speak. "Many were frozen right there. The rest of us fled into the Haunted Woods, where we hoped to lose them. On our way we met up with others from nearby villages who were also fleeing the ghoul attack. But more ghouls were waiting for us in the woods."

"What did they do to you?" Sarn asked anxiously.

"It was terrible," the young Xweetok continued. "A ghoul grabbed each of us. They are very strong, and I couldn't break free of their grip. Then they started chanting some

kind of rhyme. Their voices were horrid. The words went right through me like an icy wind. And when the incantation was finished, I couldn't move. The same thing happened to all of us!"

"Oh, that's horrible!" Liva exclaimed. It was one thing to hear about ghouls and frozen Neopets. It was quite another thing to see the results of the ghouls' terrible magic.

"Liva? Is that you?" croaked a familiar voice.

"Grandfather!" Liva cried. "No, it can't be!"

The voice had come from a frozen Neopet at the far end of the line. Liva hadn't seen him at first. She raced to the end of the line and gasped at the sight of Cramdill, frozen like all the others.

"Oh, Grandfather, how could this have happened to you?" Liva said, hugging Cramdill.

"They came into our village, scores of them, freezing Neopets left and right," Cramdill began, his voice a raspy whisper. "That young Usul there came to my house and told me to leave with the rest of them. She said I'd be safe here in the

woods. But no one knew that more ghouls were waiting for us."

For once, Liva didn't seem to know what to do. She stood by her grandfather's side with tears running down her cheeks. Sam stepped forward.

"We'll help you," he said firmly. "You'll see. Soon we'll be back in the village sharing a piece of jumbleberry pie!"

"Please, will you help us, too?" asked a tiny Usul who was standing next to Cramdill.

"We are on a quest to rid Neopia of these ghouls," Kyrok explained. "When we succeed—and we must succeed—you will return to normal."

Liva nodded, though she clung to her grandfather tightly.

Kyrok knelt down beside the young Usul. "Were you able to see in which direction the ghouls went when they left here?" the ghost asked.

"They headed off past that grove of Evil Trees," the Usul replied.

Standing, Kyrok turned and saw a thick grove of tall trees nestled among the maples and pines. Their gnarled and twisted branches shook in the wind.

"That trail leads to the Deserted Fairground," Kyrok said anxiously. "That is the same path we need to take if we are to find the magician's cave. I only hope we find the cave before we encounter the ghouls. Come now, Liva. You'll see your grandfather again, and the next time you see him he will be able to hug you back."

Liva backed away slowly, still sobbing.

"Be brave, young one," Cramdill rasped.

Liva nodded and wiped away her tears.

"And do be careful, my child," he added, his own tears flowing freely now.

"Don't worry, I'll watch out for her," Sarn said, stepping up and taking Liva's hand. "I promise."

"Watch out for each other, and return to me safely," Cramdill said. "And please . . . hurry!"

The three travelers walked on until at last they reached the foot of the mountain the Brain Tree had described. There they stood and set up camp for the night. But as soon as they huddled around their small fire, a loud shriek shook the trees around them. Suddenly, a hideous creature burst from the trees, stumbling into the campsite, kicking leaves and sticks everywhere. It limped as it stumbled. Half of its body appeared to be frozen, and the other half struggled to drag it along. Blank white eyes glowed from a cracked, colorless face.

"Zombie!" Kyrok screamed, racing toward Sarn, who was frozen with fear beside the campfire. "Sarn, run!"

The zombie stumbled toward Sarn, shrieking and clutching at its stiff arm with the hand it could still use.

Sarn stood immobilized with terror. The zombie was now inches from his face.

"Stop!" Liva shouted, stepping between Sarn and the zombie.

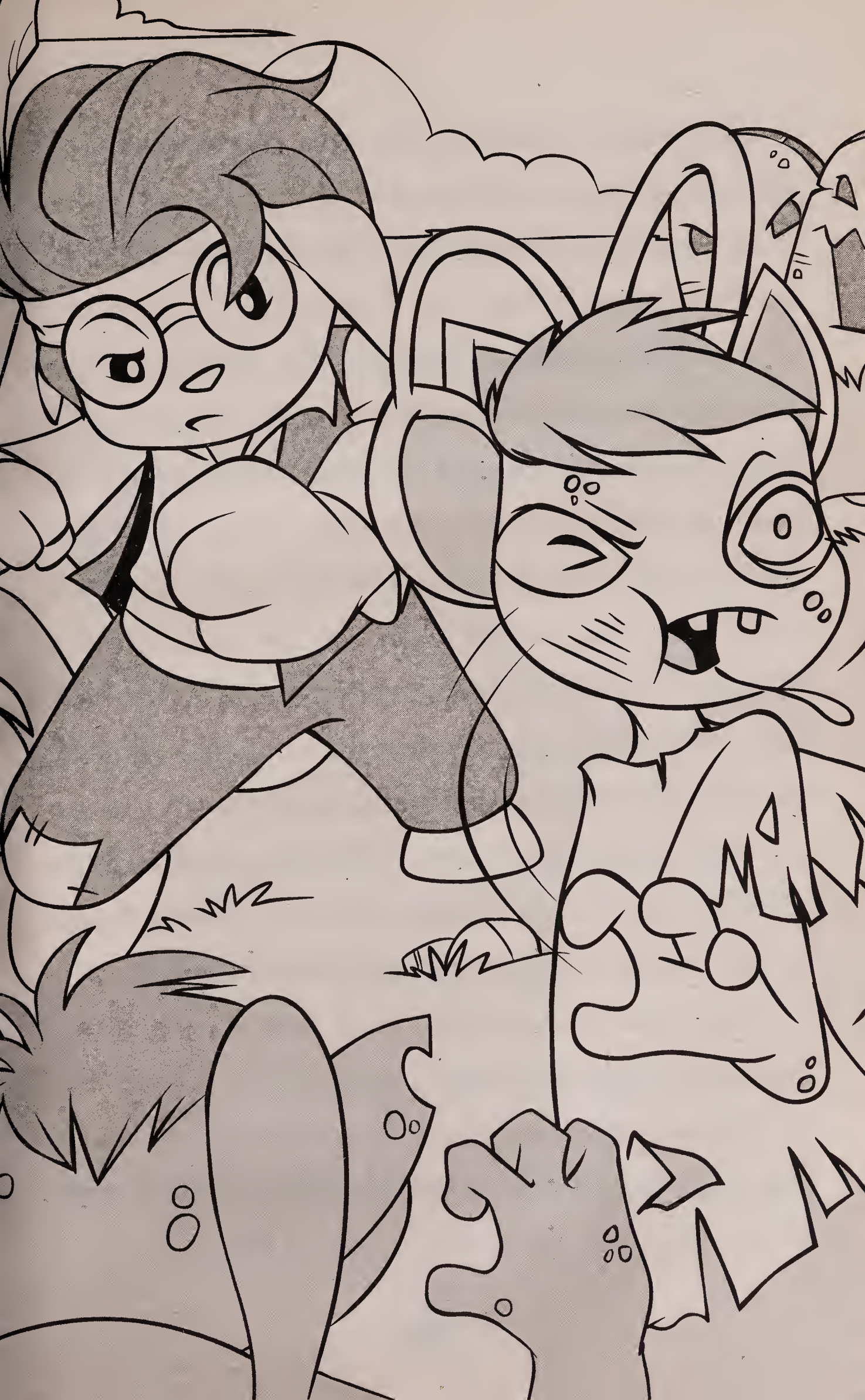
With a swift swooping motion, the zombie reached down and scooped Liva into the crook of its one good arm.

CHAPTER SIX

"No!" Sarn shouted, snapping out of his trance. He turned and chased the zombie, leaping onto the creature's stiff leg, clutching it tightly, trying desperately to dig his feet into the ground to slow the monster down. But the creature dragged Sarn along with him.

Kyrok leaped into the air and wrapped his tail around a tree limb. Swinging himself around and around to build up speed, he released his tail and shot through the air.

CRASH!



The ghost landed on the zombie's back, knocking the creature to the ground. Liva rolled free, and Sarn, seeing his friend released, let go of the monster's leg.

But Sarn was *not* going to let this ghoul get away with trying to hurt his friend. Mustering all his courage, he jumped up and struck a fighting pose, preparing to do battle with the zombie. But the monster remained sprawled on the ground, twitching relentlessly. After a few seconds the zombie's body stopped moving and crumbled into ash. Nothing remained but a pile of grey powder where the zombie had just been.

"Are you both all right?" Kyrok asked as Sarn and Liva got to their feet. All three stared down at the mound of grey ash on the ground.

"If my heart ever slows back down I'll be fine," Sarn said, taking a deep breath.

"What just happened?" Liva asked Kyrok, as the ghost used the zombie's ashes mixed with dirt to put out and cover up their fire.

"It appears that this zombie managed to escape from a ghoul who was trying to freeze it," Kyrok replied. "Even zombies have some kind of life force the ghouls can steal. The ghoul was only partially finished when the zombie broke free, and so the creature was only half frozen. Its body couldn't handle the stress and so it just disintegrated."

Liva gasped. "Will that happen to Grandfather?"

"Unlikely," Kyrok replied. "Being a zombie, that creature was already partially drained of life to start with. His body broke down under the additional stress of the ghoul attack. Now we must try to get some sleep. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"Sleep!" Sarn cried, feeling himself starting to lose it. "After that? How do we know that another zombie or mutant or whatever won't come tearing down the mountain and run right over us in the middle of the night? And now we

have no fire. How are we going to stay warm?"

"We will huddle together for warmth," Kyrok answered calmly. "And as for further attacks . . . listen."

Sarn raised an ear.

"I don't hear anything," he said.

"Neither do I. The ghouls must have moved off the mountain. If we remain quiet we should be all right."

"Should be" . . . "could be" . . . "unlikely." You can't get a straight answer out of this ghost! Sarn thought as he settled down beside Liva and closed his eyes.

Sarn was awakened by someone touching his face. "Come on, Liva, just ten more minutes," he moaned. He opened his eyes and found himself staring into the tiny black eyes of a Moach that had perched on his nose.

"Yaa!" he screamed, leaping to his feet. The petpet hopped off, landing on a nearby tree.

It scurried up the bark and disappeared into the high branches.

"Did you have to wake everyone?" Liva asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She looked around. A sickly morning light was streaming through the trees.

"What about food?" Sarn asked, feeling his stomach grumble. "I was so exhausted last night I fell asleep without even eating any dinner."

"I almost forgot," Kyrok said, extending his paw. "I picked some fruits and nuts this morning. Eat quickly. We should get moving."

After a quick breakfast, the travelers made their way up the mountain. "According to what the Brain Tree told us, the cave should be at the bottom of the far side of the mountain," Kyrok recalled.

"What's that noise?" Sarn asked.

A low moaning and wailing filled the clearing.

"That's the zombies and mutants. I spotted some while gathering food," Kyrok said. "Like

the others we met, they can't move, but they can speak. But even when they're not frozen stiff, zombies and mutants don't have much to say. Now come on."

The trail led down the back side of the mountain. By late morning, they had reached the bottom. That's when another sound caught Sarn's sensitive ears.

"There!" he cried. "Listen."

"Listen to what?" Liva asked. "I don't hear any— Oh. That!"

A chorus of ghoulish voices chanting in unison grew louder as they listened.

"The ghouls have caught someone else," Kyrok said softly. "From the sound of it, there must be twenty voices chanting."

Slowly creeping closer, the three strained their ears to catch the horrible words:

Power of darkness, bringer of rage,
Remove this life force from its natural cage.

And when the theft is finished, your strength from you it drains,

I shall vanish like a shadow, but your life in me remains.

"Let's get out of here!" Sarn cried, his whole body shaking.

"Yes," Kyrok agreed. "We must hurry and find the cave of Quonsar. Then we can equip the two of you with some magic."

As quietly as they could, the trio pressed on until they spotted something in the distance.

"There!" Kyrok said, pointing. "Where the rock curves down. There seems to be an opening. I believe it's a cave."

Sure enough, right where the slope of the mountain met the level ground of the woods, a small opening in the rock appeared.

Stepping up to the cave wall Kyrok leaned forward and pressed his body against it. A bright flash lit up the forest as Kyrok was thrown

backward. He skidded across the rocky slope and then came to a stop, fully visible once again.

"Kyrok!" Liva cried.

"I'm all right," the ghost said, shaking his head and climbing to his feet. "I should have guessed. This is a magician's cave. He has protected the walls with a magical barrier. I can't pass through it. We must enter through the opening."

Sarn looked at the opening and knew what he had to do. It was his time to be brave and help his friends.

Taking a deep breath, Sarn found the words he needed.

"I'll go," he offered.

"Yes," Kyrok agreed, turning to look at Sarn. "You, my brave Kacheek, will enter the cave of Quonsar!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Liva smiled, beaming with pride.

"How am I going to see down there in the dark?" Sarn asked.

Kyrok rolled a bunch of dry leaves inside a wrapper made of large green ones. Then he tied the bundle together with a strong vine he plucked from a nearby tree and placed it on the end of a long stick.

"Your torch, young hero," Kyrok said.

"Good luck, Sarn," Liva added. "We'll be right here."

Sarn nodded, then squeezed the upper half of his body through the hole.

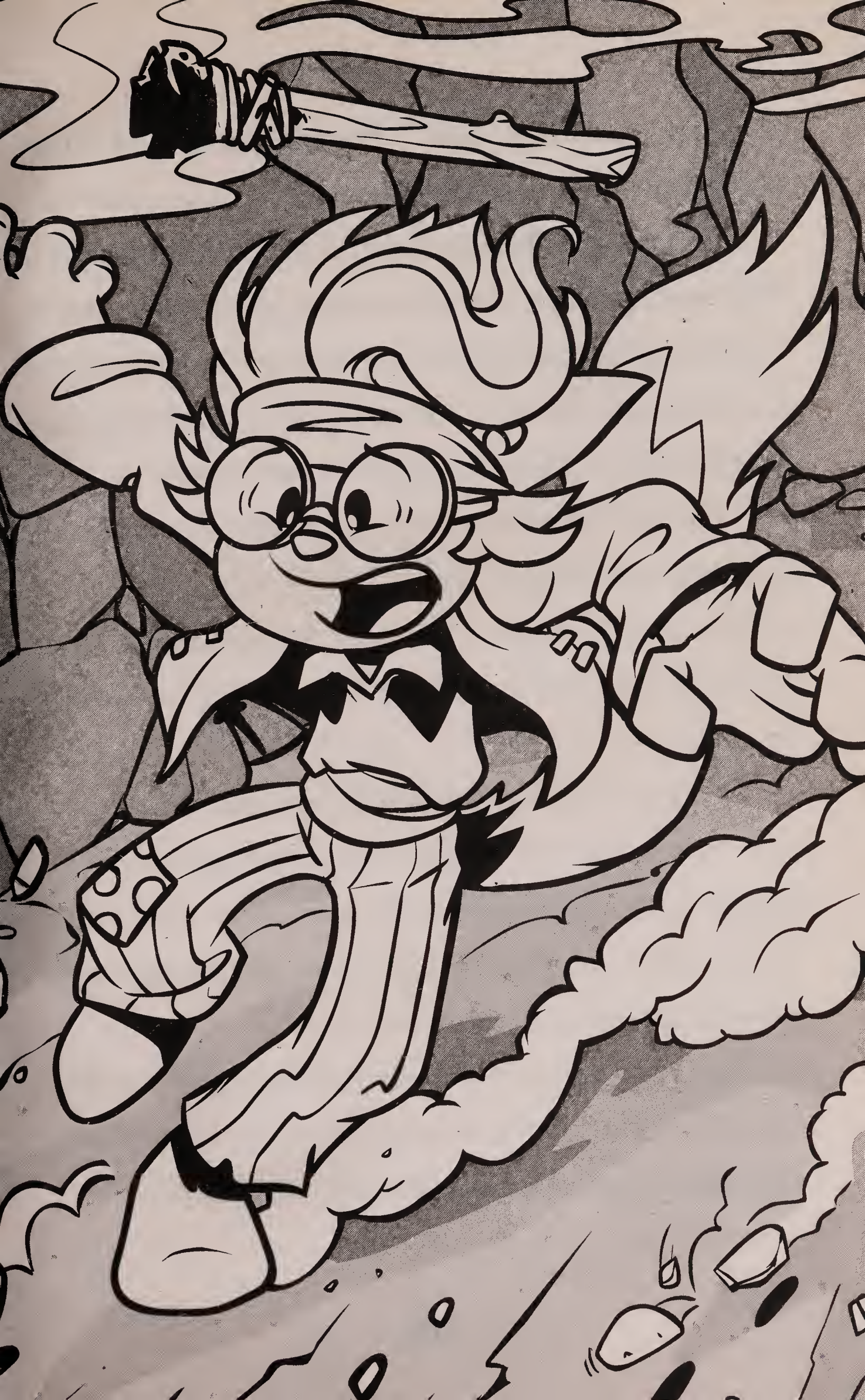
"I'm in!" he shouted.

Holding the torch in front of him, Sarn slowly made his way down a set of rough stone stairs. The stairs were damp and slippery and Sarn tried to be certain of his footing with each step.

A sudden screech sounded, echoing wildly, followed by a fluttering of wings. Bats filled the cave, obliterating the tiny amount of light thrown off by Sarn's torch.

Sarn stumbled backward and lost his footing. He tried to grab the edge with one hand and desperately cling to the torch with the other. But the step was too slick. Sarn stumbled down into the darkness below.

"Sarn!" Liva shouted into the cave opening. She got no reply. "Something's happened to him!" she said to Kyrok in a panic. "We've got to do something!"



"I'm sure he's fine!" Kyrok protested. "He must have found a way down."

"But how will he get back up?" Liva demanded. Without waiting for an answer she raced up the rocky incline just above the cave entrance. Coming to a plateau she saw a small cabin that looked as if it had been abandoned for a long time.

"Kyrok!" she shouted back down the slope. "I found something."

Kyrok spread his pale blue wings and hoisted himself into the air. Within seconds, he landed beside Liva.

"You can fly?" she asked in amazement.

"What do you think the wings are for?" he replied, shrugging. Then he glanced at the cabin. "This must be where Quonsar lived, although his lab was obviously in that cave."

"Maybe we can find something in there that can help Sarn!" Liva said excitedly. Then she bolted toward the ramshackle cabin.

★ ★ ★

Down Sarn plunged, sliding along smooth curving stones. After a few seconds, he emerged from the stone tube and landed on the ground. His torch had gone out. He was sitting on a cold rock floor in total darkness. His journey to the cave floor had happened so fast that Sarn's brain didn't have time to figure out just how much trouble he was really in.

With a startling whooshing sound, a series of wall sconces burst into flames, as if some unseen hand had lit them all at once. The circular room at the bottom of the cave where Sarn had landed was suddenly filled with light.

Standing, Sarn looked around at what had obviously been the magician's lab. A long stone table cluttered with wooden bowls and glass beakers ran down the center of the room. Cobweb-covered shelves lined the walls, filled with bottles and jars of multicolored liquids.

"Looks like I found the potions," Sarn muttered to himself. "Too bad I'll never get to use them."

By the flickering torchlight Sarn read off the labels on various potions sitting on the dusty shelves. ELIXIR OF LEVITATION, POTION OF ENLARGEMENT, TINCTURE OF STRENGTH, TONIC OF INVISIBILITY.

"Wow! This is amazing!" Sarn cried, gathering up a handful of bottles and thrusting them into the pouch that he always carried. Fascinated as he was by his discovery, the fact that he was trapped in a cave with no apparent way out had, for the moment, slipped his mind.

A thin hissing sound filled the lab. Instantly, Sarn remembered he was trapped in a cave.

Something slithered among the shadows beyond the torchlight—something big. An enormous purple Drackonack skittered across the stone floor, its long, red tongue darting in and out of its mouth and its mottled, leathery skin creasing with each step. It raced toward Sarn, hissing and spitting and baring razor-sharp teeth.

Sarn fumbled with the potions in his hands. The Drackonack was inches away, its steamy, foul breath filling Sarn's nostrils.

He dove away from the charging Drackonack, which skidded right past him and crashed into the far wall. Then Sarn scrambled to his feet as the creature turned around for another pass.

The Drackonack rushed toward Sarn, who leaped up onto the stone lab table, scattering bowls and beakers. The charging beast stopped short, hissing and flashing its tongue up at Sarn.

Slowly, the creature began to climb up the wooden leg of the table.

The Drackonack's front paw slammed down onto the tabletop. Sarn backed away. Then something hit him in the head.

"Yaa!" he cried in shock, turning around to see a rope dangling right next to him. The rope stretched up into the darkness above.

He grabbed it and started climbing up, hoping all the while that table-climbing Drackonacks

couldn't also climb ropes.

The rope suddenly went taut from above and Sarn found himself being pulled up, just as the creature charged. As he rose above the level of the flaming torches, they all went out at once, plunging the cavern into total darkness once again.

Slowly Sarn went. After a long, dark trip, Sarn caught sight of a glimmer of light a few feet above his head.

"Liva!" he shouted.

"Hold on, Sarn!" came the reply. "Almost there."

He had never been so happy to hear his friend's voice. As Sarn's face reached the level of the cave opening he saw Kyrok pulling the rope that had brought him up to safety. Liva grabbed Sarn's hand and helped him out of the cave.

Sarn collapsed on the ground beside her. Then he stuck his hand into his pouch and showed them the bottles. "Here, look what I found!"

"You're quite the little hero, aren't you?" Kyrok said, tossing the rope aside. "That's some haul you carried up. What have you got there? Levitation, enlargement, strength, invisibility. These will come in very handy."

"You were pretty brave," Liva said. "For a Kacheek, anyway!"

Sarn beamed.

"So now that we have some magic to use, how do we track down those ghouls?" Sarn asked Kyrok.

"Just turn around," snarled a raspy voice from behind.

Sarn spun on his heels. He was face-to-face with a ghoul.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sarn panicked. He started running, desperate to avoid getting caught in the ghouls' icy grasp. As he ran, he fumbled in his pouch containing the magic potions.

Sarn read the label on the first bottle he grabbed. TONIC OF INVISIBILITY. Without thinking, he popped the ancient cork and drank the greenish liquid, draining the entire bottle.

"This is amazing!" Sarn said, holding his hands up in front of his face, marveling that he couldn't see them. "Wait until Liva sees me.

Well, she won't be able to actually *see* me, but—Liva! The ghouls! What a fool I am, standing here babbling to myself. I've got to save Liva!"

Sarn ran back toward the cave, watching the leaves and twigs crunch beneath his invisible feet. After a few minutes, he heard voices. He stopped short and stood quietly. *That's not Liva and Kyrok,* he realized. *It's the ghouls!*

Sarn could make out two ghouls standing close to the spot where they had surprised him. One had a face that looked as if it were made of wax and was melting. The other had rough, scaly skin that had begun to peel off like a snake's. They both looked dazed and dirty, as if they had just been in a fight—and lost. "How could you let the little one go, filth face?" hissed the scaly one.

"I didn't let her go, lizard face," screeched the other ghoul. "The invisible one pulled me away."

"She was just a little Wocky, and you couldn't hold her, could you?"

A Wocky! Liva! They got away! Sarn thought, his spirits brightening.

"Gnawthral will not be pleased at all!" the peeling ghoul shouted. "Not at all!"

Gnawthral! That's the ghoul Kyrok wants to find! He's the leader. The one with the book!

"Well, *I'm* not telling him! We must now hurry back to the Castle of Eliv Thade," the ghoul announced. "Gnawthral awaits our return."

The Castle of Eliv Thade! Sarn thought as he slowly backed away from the battling ghouls. *That's where we'll find Gnawthral. That's great! I've got to tell Kyrok. But first I have to find him and Liva!*

When the two ghouls attacked, Kyrok had reacted swiftly, turning himself invisible and tripping them up, leaving the creatures dazed. Then he and Liva had made their escape only to discover that Sarn was missing.

"I wish I had seen what direction he ran off

in," Liva said between shouts of Sarn's name.

"There are several paths leading away from the magician's cave," Kyrok pointed out. "And they all end up at the same place—the Deserted Fairground."

"The Brain Tree mentioned that place," Liva recalled. "What is it?"

"Let's just say it's not a place where a little Kacheek should end up alone!"

Sarn retraced his steps away from the cave and hurried back along the path he had first taken when he fled from the ghouls. "Where else could they have gone?" he muttered to himself. "They wouldn't go back over the mountain. They must have come this way."

As darkness descended on the forest, Sarn came to a rusty metal gate. At the top of the gate a sign reading FAIRGROUND dangled crookedly by one nail. It rocked back and forth in the wind, creaking and moaning as it scraped against the

tarnished entryway. Squinting to make out the objects beyond the gate, Sarn could vaguely see some tall metallic structures and a line of what appeared to be tents.

Fairground? Sarn thought as he peered through the gate's iron bars. *The Brain Tree said something about a deserted fairground. This place looks pretty deserted to me.*

At the precise moment that the sky changed from dark blue to midnight black, bright lights suddenly illuminated the fairground beyond the gate. Sarn blinked a few times as his eyes adjusted. When he could finally see, he discovered that the entire fairground had come alive.

The brilliantly colored lights outlined a Ferris wheel, a roller coaster, and a dozen other rides. A moment later, the rides started spinning and rolling as calliope music blared from tinny speakers dangling sloppily from tall wooden poles. Colorful pennants flapped in the night wind, surrounded by a line of tents.

Slowly, he pushed open the rusty gate, which whined in protest, then hurried into the wonderland beyond.

When he stepped inside of the first tent he spotted, a flurry of activity greeted his eager eyes. Barkers of every shape, size, and costume stood at a long line of booths screaming for visitors to "Step right up!" "Knock the Scarescorchio from his perch!" "Fling the disc through the revolving hole!" "Roll the ball and knock down the squawking mallards!"

The odd part was that other than Sarn and the barkers, there was no one in the tents. It appeared to Sarn that the barkers were switched on, along with the lights, and played out their routine night after night, whether or not any customers came wandering through the tent flap.

Sarn stepped up to the first booth, ready to toss bean bags at cardboard cutouts of dancing Polarchucks. Then he remembered that he was invisible.

"Take a toss, friend!" the barker shouted, looking right at Sarn and handing him the bean bags.

Sarn checked his hand. Still invisible. *How can he see me?* he wondered. The sack appeared to be floating in midair even though Sarn could feel it firmly in his grasp.

Sarn concentrated, reared back, and fired the bean bag at the spinning cardboard Polarchucks. As the bag reached its target one of the Polarchucks reached out, plucked the bag from midair, and fired it back at Sarn.

He ducked and the bag sailed just over his head.

"You lose!" cackled the barker.

Sarn dashed down the line of booths and burst from the tent, rushing into the radiant neon night. Spinning, flashing colors filled his vision. Throbbing, shrill music assaulted his sensitive ears.

Before Sarn could catch his breath, a Gelert

dressed in a red-and-white-striped jacket with a carnation in the lapel, a white shirt, and a red bow tie stepped up behind him and hustled him toward the giant Ferris wheel.

"Your ride is ready," the Gelert squawked, flashing a gleaming white smile, twisting a pencil-thin moustache between his left thumb and forefinger, and twirling a curved wooden cane around his right wrist.

"Ride?" Sarn asked, confused at meeting someone else who could see him in his invisible form.

"Okay, if you insist!" the Gelert squawked, pulling a long lever beside the spinning ride.

The neon-outlined Ferris wheel slowed to a stop, its seats swinging back and forth from the momentum. Without another word, the Gelert shoved Sarn into a seat, slammed the safety bar down onto his lap, and threw the lever forward.

The great wheel groaned, its ancient gears grinding, its seats squeaking as they swayed.

Slowly, up Sarn went toward the night sky, alone and terrified on this monstrous contraption.

As the Ferris wheel began its descent back toward the ground, Sarn looked back to the other cars. They, too, were now occupied—by horrible creatures, snarling and hissing, growling with evil intent. All of the monsters' red-streaked eyes were fixed on Sarn. Then, as one, they each left their own cars and began climbing along the steel girders of the Ferris wheel. Some creatures climbed up from the lower cars, others down from the cars above Sarn, all heading toward him.

I'm trapped! he thought, his panic now way beyond his simple fear of heights. *I can't climb up or down. They're coming toward me in both directions!*

Sarn dug into his pouch and fumbled with the bottles of potions until he had found the Elixir of Levitation. *Just a little,* he thought, popping the cork and taking a tiny sip.

Sarn shot straight up into the air, rising higher and higher away from the ghouls. "It worked!" he cried.

If I can fly, he thought, *I can go search for Liva and Kyrok.* So far he had flown only straight up. He leaned to the right to try to change direction, but nothing happened. No matter how he contorted his body, he just kept going up. And then, without warning, he stopped.

For a split second, Sarn hung frozen in midair, high above the fairground. Then the potion wore off and he started plummeting downward.

CHAPTER NINE

The ground rushed toward Sarn at an alarming rate. *I guess I didn't drink enough of that stuff!* he thought. *Got to get more.* But the force of his fall caused the pouch to float over his head, just beyond his reach. He was once again at the mercy of gravity, gaining speed the closer he got to the ground.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye Sarn caught sight of a blue streak racing toward him. It looked like a blur in the sky as it came closer. Then, just like that, Sarn stopped falling.

Now he was moving sideways, flying through the air at stunning speed. It took him a moment to realize that he was cradled in Kyrok's arms. The Eyrie's mighty wings beat hard against the moonlit sky.

"Kyrok! You found me!" he cried.

"So it seems," Kyrok said, sounding slightly annoyed. "You certainly didn't make it easy."

"Wait!" Sarn exclaimed. "You can see me and I can see you. How is that possible?"

"Because we are both invisible," Kyrok explained.

Sarn sighed and remained quiet for the rest of the journey to the far side of the Deserted Fairground. Kyrok made himself visible again and landed in a wooded area just beyond the back gate of the fairgrounds. Liva was waiting.

"You didn't find him!?" she whimpered, her eyes welling up with tears.

"I'm right here, Liva!" Sarn said, though to Liva it appeared that his voice was coming from

out of nowhere. "I'm invisible!"

"I see. I mean . . . I *don't* see," Liva corrected herself, chuckling. "What happened to you in there?" She pointed back to the fairground.

Sarn recounted his bizarre and harrowing adventure for the others. "Who were all those creatures in there?" he asked.

"Night spirits," Kyrok replied. "The whole place is haunted by night spirits, who can see invisible beings."

"That's why they could see me!" Sarn realized.

"And those two ghouls who attacked us were minor soldiers in Gnawthral's army," Kyrok explained.

Gnawthral! The ghouls! After all the craziness in the Deserted Fairground, Sarn had forgotten about what he had learned from them. "I know where he is!" Sarn blurted out.

"Know where *who* is?" Kyrok asked.

"Gnawthral!" Sarn exclaimed. "Gnawthral is in the Castle of Eliv Thade!"

"Good work, Sarn!" Kyrok cried, his mood suddenly brightening. "We must go to Thade's castle and get back that book!"

With that, Kyrok turned and headed away from the fairground, plunging back into the thick woods. Sarn looked back at the soft neon glow beyond the fence, where the bizarre carnival was still in full swing.

"Come on, Sarn," Liva said. "Let's go."

"Um, I'm over here, Liva," Sarn replied, taking her hand and following Kyrok into the woods.

Sarn marched along behind Kyrok, with Liva taking up the rear.

"Who is Eliv Thade?" Liva asked a short while later as the trio marched deeper into the fog-shrouded woods.

"Probably the most infamous Kacheek who ever lived," Kyrok began.

"A long time ago Eliv Thade lived in his castle and worked as a puzzle writer," Kyrok began.

"Being a Kacheek, he was also a master puzzle solver. Visitors came from great distances trying to stump him, but none ever did. Then one day, one of his servants gave him the most difficult puzzle he had ever seen. Thade was stumped. He became obsessed with finding a solution—so obsessed that he went mad. His servants fled, the castle fell into disrepair, and Eliv Thade died alone, never having found the solution. He still haunts the castle to this day."

"And we're going there!" Sarn cried, his courage now a distant memory.

"Gnawthral is clever," Kyrok went on. "He has chosen to use the castle as a safe haven, since so many fear the place."

Kyrok paused and turned to the two young Neopets.

"Our task will not be easy," he stated. "But we have the element of surprise on our side. We know that Gnawthral is inside the castle, but he doesn't know that we are coming for him.

But before we face Gnawthral we will need to get past the ghost of Eliv Thade. For that, we will rely on you, Sarn."

Sarn was glad he was invisible so Kyrok couldn't see the terror he was sure was showing on his face. "M-me," he stammered.

"Yes. For Eliv Thade to allow us to move freely in his castle, we must solve a puzzle he gives us. He still fancies himself a puzzle writer, and he takes pleasure in trying to stump anyone who enters his house. Once again, Sarn, we need your skill."

By the time Sarn, Liva, and Kyrok reached the castle, the full moon had risen to its highest point in the night sky. Moonlight shimmered through the fog, casting misty shadows on the stone stronghold. The night was still with an unsettling quiet.

Sarn saw the centuries of ivy climbing up the outer walls, leading to a tall turret high above

the ground. "Maybe no one's home," he said hopefully.

"Eliv Thade never leaves," Kyrok pointed out. "He remains obsessed with solving the puzzle that drove him mad. He spends every moment poring over books in his library, searching for that elusive solution. And he knows many, many puzzles. He will challenge you with one from his vast collection."

Sarn pushed the door and to his surprise it opened smoothly and silently. Stepping in, he saw a large circular room with a series of low-arching hallways leading out in many directions. The signs of neglect were everywhere. Smashed windows were left unrepaired, broken torches lay scattered on the floor. The place smelled like mildew, dank and pungent, certainly not welcoming to guests.

"Which way?" Liva asked.

"There!" Kyrok whispered, pointing to the center hallway.

Making their way down the hallway, the trio

soon came to a door marked LIBRARY. From a narrow opening at the bottom of the door came a soft glow.

"The library of Eliv Thade," Kyrok whispered.

The door swung open suddenly. In the doorway stood a wild-eyed Kacheek. His ears stood straight up. His tail twitched back and forth constantly.

"Who dares disturb me?" the Kacheek blustered. "For your trespassing you will be punished severely."

Sarn and Liva backed away. Kyrok stood his ground.

Eliv Thade rushed toward them, sending the three travelers running back down the hallway.

"None pass this way who live to tell the tale!" Eliv Thade shouted, closing in on Sarn.

"I thought I was only going to have to solve a puzzle!" Sarn shouted at Kyrok.

Eliv Thade stopped suddenly. "Puzzle?" he

asked, the look on his face changing from anger to confusion.

Kyrok grabbed Sarn and Liva to stop them from running.

"Yes," Kyrok said. "The Kacheek I travel with has agreed to solve one of your puzzles. If you think you can stump him."

"You dare question my puzzles!" Eliv Thade raged. "They cannot be solved. Many have tried, none have succeeded." Then he stared right at Sarn.

"Do you claim to be up to the challenge, young and brash Kacheek?" Eliv Thade asked. "For if you fail, your doom is sealed!"

Sarn swallowed hard. Obviously Eliv Thade could see him. Sarn figured this was because he was a ghost.

Kyrok spoke up. "And if we succeed?" he asked. "What then is our reward?"

"Reward!" Eliv Thade screamed, his face twisting into a mask of rage once again.

Sarn and Liva backed farther away.

"We ask only access to your castle in return for the Kacheek's solution," Kyrok explained calmly.

Eliv Thade turned away and began muttering, as if debating with himself as to what his next move should be.

Then he turned back swiftly and said, "Agreed."

Sarn, Liva, and Kyrok followed Eliv Thade into his library. The vast room was lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. Sarn saw long library tables covered with open books piled one atop the next. Eliv Thade drifted back to his books and began flipping through pages, scribbling notes on a torn shred of paper, and mumbling to himself. "Lots to do. Must solve the puzzle."

Liva looked at Kyrok and rolled her eyes. "He's completely insane," she whispered.

"Yes, and all these years alone in the castle haven't helped," whispered Kyrok.

"Well, Kacheek, are you up to the task of

solving one of my puzzles?" Eliv Thade snarled.

Sarn stood up to his full height, which still left him a few inches shorter than the ghostly Kacheek. "I am ready," he announced confidently. His heart pounded and his tail twitched, but no one seemed to notice.

"Very well," said Eliv Thade. "Here is the puzzle. It's an anagram. Take the letters in the word 'astronomer,' rearrange them, and make a new word or phrase with the same meaning. Begin!"

Sarn looked up at the night sky and pictured the letters in the word "astronomer" floating in front of his eyes. He shuffled and reshuffled the letters, trying to find a word or words that made sense. As he glanced over at the moon the letters "o-n-o-m" floated past. He quickly rearranged them into the word "moon." Then the remaining letters fell into place like the final piece of an elaborate jigsaw puzzle.

"Moon starer!" he blurted out. "The answer

is 'moon starer.' That's what an astronomer is, right?"

"Correct. You have topped me, Kacheek." Thade sighed sadly. "Very well. You may search my castle."

The hallway branched off in opposite directions. Kyrok decided to follow a descending staircase.

"This whole castle is like a giant maze," Sarn said.

Finally, they reached the end of the stairs that led to a small, dark room. "This must be the hidden entrance to the castle's dungeons," Kyrok said, looking around. "We are in the lowest level of the castle."

A sliver of light revealed a large room with rough stone walls. The floor was dirt, the very earth upon which the castle was built thousands of years ago. Metal manacles hung from the wall, evidence of prisoners once chained and most likely forgotten down in this dreadful place.

"Grab those," Kyrok ordered, pointing to a series of lit torches on the wall. The added light revealed a series of low, stone passageways.

"Crypts, no doubt," Kyrok said. "Let's see if we can find a way back up—"

"What was that?" Sarn asked, as his sensitive ears picked up a sound. "It sounds like chanting and footsteps . . . lots and lots of footsteps!"

The chanting grew loud enough that Kyrok and Liva heard it, too. Kyrok's eyes opened wide at the sound. "Ghouls! The ghouls are down here in these crypts!"

Suddenly, ghouls burst forth from each of the passageways, streaming into the room and surrounding the three friends.

"Okay, we found them," Sarn said anxiously. "Now what do we do!?"

CHAPTER TEN

"Get behind me!" Kyrok shouted as he knelt down and picked up the sword that rested beside the fallen suit of armor.

Snarling, grunting, and spitting, the ghouls rushed forward. Sarn noticed that each one was repulsive in his own revolting way. One had a misshapen face that reminded Sarn of melting candles. Another had a hunched-over body, bent and broken. One dragged a useless leg as it limped, while another raised one fist in anger as its other arm hung limply at its side.

"These guys are in pretty bad shape," Sarn whispered to Kyrok.

"Constant use of dark magic takes its toll," Kyrok explained as the ghouls came closer. "It gives them great power, but at a very high cost."

Kyrok stepped forward and vanished, leaving the impression of a gleaming sword swooping back and forth through the air on its own.

The ghouls stopped suddenly, confused and frightened by the floating weapon.

Despite their foul appearance, the ghouls were clever. Realizing they couldn't make a direct charge past the floating sword, they spread out to either side of the room and began to close in on Liva, who was now their only visible target.

"Sarn," Kyrok whispered. "Now is the time to use your invisibility to our advantage. Quickly, find something to use as a weapon."

Sarn was hesitant to move away from Liva, but he knew that Kyrok was right. Darting over

to the wall, he grabbed an unlit torch. Doing his best to remain unnoticed, Sarn slowly made his way to a spot next to the archway from which the ghouls were pouring into the room.

As each ghoul stepped into the crypt, Sarn bopped him on the head with the torch. One by one the ghouls crumpled to the floor, piling up in a heap.

Ghouls had stopped coming through the arch, but Sarn could still hear their shrieking cries echoing down the passageway. Feeling his courage rise, he slipped into the passageway to hunt out more ghouls and stop them before they could even get close to the crypt.

Meanwhile, Liva backed into one corner with Kyrok right in front of her so the ghouls couldn't approach from two directions. Kyrok swung the sword in the air keeping the ghouls at bay. They hissed angrily as they backed away from the glinting weapon.

Seeing an opportunity to take action, Liva

grabbed Kyrok's carrying bag and pulled out the rope.

"Liva!" Kyrok cried.

"Don't worry, I have an idea," she replied.

Liva tied one end of the rope to a circular metal handle attached to one of the stone tombs. Clutching the other end of the rope firmly in her hand, Liva dashed past the ghouls, stretching the rope out in front of them, as Kyrok held them off with the sword. Liva continued running around the bunched-up group, sweeping back behind them, until she formed a complete loop with the rope.

Confused ghouls watched the speeding Wocky racing around them. A few started to move toward her to attack, but Kyrok reacted swiftly, brandishing the sword. The ghouls retreated, howling in frustration.

As Liva returned to the tomb where the rope was tied, she threaded the loose end through the metal loop. "Kyrok, I could use a hand here!"

Realizing what Liva was planning, Kyrok lowered his sword and hurried to her side. Dropping the weapon and becoming visible once again, Kyrok grabbed the loose end of the rope with both hands.

"On three," Liva whispered. "One, two, three!"

Kyrok and Liva both yanked as hard as they could on the rope. As they pulled, the loop tightened, closing around the ghouls' legs.

"Keep pulling!" Kyrok shouted as he and Liva stepped back, closing the loop, inch by inch.

With the floating sword no longer a threat and Kyrok's form revealed, the ghouls rushed forward—but they didn't get far. Bound at the ankles, the ghouls tripped over one another, tumbling together in a huge pile. Looping the remaining rope around the mass of bodies a few more times, Kyrok tied the loose end to the tomb handle, securely harnessing the ghouls.

"We did it!" Liva shouted.

"Very clever plan, Liva! Nice work!" Kyrok

exclaimed, hugging her. "You too, Sarn. Sarn?"

Liva's momentary celebration was cut short by a sudden jolt of fear. "Sarn!" she shouted, but got no reply. "Where did he go?"

Sarn moved slowly through a passageway as the sound of pounding footsteps grew louder by the second.

Here they come!

Sarn spun around in terror. He raised his torch, ready for battle and, for the first time in a while, saw his hand clutching the weapon. Sarn realized, as a second wave of fear washed over him, that he was no longer invisible.

He stared up at the figure before him. In the flickering torchlight, Sarn could make out a short, ugly ghoul. His face was drawn, his sunken eyes yellow. His filthy fur was matted, grey, and missing in spots. He appeared to be frail and sickly, but when he spoke, there was no mistaking who this was.

"So, my brave little Kacheek, it appears that your power of invisibility has worn off at a most inopportune moment."

"Gnawthral!" Sarn cried, realizing that he was face-to-face with the leader of the ghouls.

"You know me? I'm flattered," Gnawthral cackled. "I certainly know you."

"You do?" Sarn asked, surprised that someone so powerful would know who he was.

"You travel with the traitor, Kyrok," Gnawthral snarled. "My spies have kept me aware of his movements. And it is my intent to complete what was left unfinished long ago."

"I will draw him to me using you as bait, and then I will destroy him," Gnawthral said.

Gnawthral's hands flashed out with the quickness of a lizard's tongue, locking Sarn in a firm grasp. The Kacheek's torch dropped to the ground as he felt his breath flee his body.

And then the now-all-too-familiar chant began:

"Power of darkness, bringer of rage
Remove this life force from its natural cage."

Sarn shoved his hand into his pouch, not caring which potion he grabbed. Any magic would help him at this point. But he was running out of time.

"And when the theft is finished, your strength from you it drains . . ."

Sarn worked the cork off the bottle, then lifted it to his mouth. Gnawthral made no move to stop him, intent on completing his task. As Sarn sucked a small sip of liquid from the bottle he caught a glimpse of the label: TINCTURE OF STRENGTH.

Sarn grabbed Gnawthral's arms and yanked hard, breaking the ghoul's grip. He felt enormous strength coursing through his muscles. Then he shoved the ghoul back and fled from the crypt.

"Kyrok!" he yelled, his voice echoing through the passageways. "I've found him. I've found Gnawthral!"

"Sarn!" Liva cried. "But where is he?"

"Follow me," Kyrok said, picking up his pace through the passageway.

"Kyrok, he's here. Gnawthral's here!" Sarn cried as he and Liva hugged.

"How sweet," growled a voice from behind Sarn.

Gnawthral stepped from the shadows.

"Get back!" Kyrok ordered, shoving Liva and Sarn behind him. "This is *my* fight."

"But we're a team!" Liva cried.

"So, you and me," snarled Gnawthral who, despite his short stature, was an imposing figure. "Just like old times, eh, Kyrok?"

Kyrok raised himself to his full height and spread his wings wide. "You know there is only one way this can end, Gnawthral!"

"Yes," Gnawthral hissed. "And I'm afraid your little playmates will be ever so lonely when you are gone!"

Gnawthral charged at Kyrok. The Eyrie lifted himself into the air avoiding Gnawthral's onrush. Then he dropped onto the ghoul, knocking him to the ground. Liva and Sarn shrank back against the stone walls, startled and frightened by the intense battle taking place before them.

Kyrok and Gnawthral rolled around on the ground, each struggling to gain the upper hand. But their strength seemed equal.

"Give me the book!" Kyrok shouted, leaping to his feet, dragging Gnawthral with him.

"Do you think I would be foolish enough to carry the book with me!" Gnawthral shot back, recovering his balance and shoving Kyrok backward.

Gnawthral seized Kyrok by the arms. The ghoul's repulsive face turned bright red, his pale eyes smoldering with a sickly yellow glow.

Kyrok's face twisted in pain.

"You forget, *old friend,* the power of dark magic!" Gnawthral cackled, as Kyrok's knees buckled.

"And you, *old friend,* have forgotten the power of a ghost!" Kyrok raged.

Kyrok appeared to grow in size. The bigger he got the harder he was to see. When he became almost completely invisible, Kyrok passed right through Gnawthral, ending up behind him. Rematerializing, the ghost grabbed his adversary from behind and took to the air.

Speeding across the crypt, Kyrok slammed Gnawthral into the wall. The ghoul collapsed onto the stone floor. Kyrok landed, towering over him threateningly.

"All right. You win!" Gnawthral shouted, getting to his feet. "Your strength has grown since we last met. I'll give you the book. I lied. It is here. I have it hidden in a safe place."

Kyrok eyed him carefully as Gnawthral ran

his hand along the crypt wall. The sound of approaching ghouls grew louder. Kyrok needed to get his hands on that book right now or they'd be facing another attack.

Reaching a circular stone no bigger than his hand, Gnawthral grabbed it and twisted. A section of the wall slid open with a grinding whir revealing a secret compartment just slightly larger than the ghoul himself.

"It's right in here," Gnawthral said, stepping into the opening. He reached out and grabbed something—not a book, but another circular stone. He twisted it and the wall slid shut behind him.

"Gnawthral!" Kyrok shouted, furious that he had allowed himself to be tricked.

The first ghouls appeared in the archway.

Kyrok rushed to the wall and turned the first stone. The wall slid open again, but the compartment was empty. Stepping in, followed closely by Sarn and Liva, Kyrok twisted the

second stone. The wall slid shut, leaving them in total darkness.

"There must be a back way out of here," he said to himself. "Another door that Gnawthral used to escape. But how will we find it in the dark?"

"I think I have something," Sarn shouted. He had been walking around the small compartment in the total darkness feeling the stone wall, searching for evidence of a door.

"I can feel a seam in the wall," Sarn announced. "Like the edge of a doorway."

"But what good is that without the control to open it?" Liva asked.

Sarn still felt tremendous strength flowing through his body. He dug his fingers into the thin seam and pulled, straining his body to its utmost limits. Slowly a door in the wall, opposite the one through which they had entered the compartment, slid open. Torchlight poured into the dark chamber. "Go!" Sarn yelled urgently.

Kyrok and Liva slipped through the narrow opening. Then Sarn shoved his foot into the gap to hold the door open and flung his body through. He landed hard on the damp stone as the door slammed shut behind him.

"Nice work, strong man!" Liva said, helping Sarn to his feet.

Looking around, they discovered that they had landed in a narrow passageway.

"Hurry, we must catch Gnawthral before he escapes!" Kyrok announced.

The three friends spent the next several minutes searching crypts and passageways. But the narrow path they started out on branched into a complex maze with branches splitting off in multiple directions.

Finally, they discovered a twisting stone staircase. Rushing up the steps, they emerged into the hallway near Eliv Thade's library.

"I let him escape! I can't believe I allowed him to trick me." Kyrok groaned.

"So we'd better hurry, then," Liva said, squeezing Kyrok's hand reassuringly.

"Yeah, he has only a few minutes' lead on us," Sarn pointed out. "If we move quickly, we might still catch him."

Kyrok sighed and smiled weakly. "You are right, my good friends. I let my despair get the better of me for a moment. But with all that is at stake, we cannot fail. We must continue our pursuit."

Kyrok, Sarn, and Liva hurried from the castle, back into the woods. They picked up the main path leading away from the castle and quickened the pace.

"Kyrok," Liva said after a while, "what did Gnawthral mean when he said 'Just like old times'?"

Kyrok looked away. He had hoped to complete this quest without revealing everything to his young companions. That, however, would no longer be possible.

"Yeah," Sarn added. "He talked about using me as bait."

"Bait?" Liva asked. "Bait for what?"

"For me," Kyrok replied. Pausing beneath a grove of dead trees, the trio sat and Kyrok continued. "Years ago, long before Gnawthral became a ghoul, he and I were best friends. But our friendship ended when Gnawthral's love of power drained all the good from him.

"When Gnawthral led the ghouls during their first attack on Neopia, I joined Professor Vinsjin and his team of ghoul hunters. Fighting beside Vinsjin, I helped banish Gnawthral and his minions from Neopia. However, not without a price. I was struck down during the battle and later returned to Neopia as a ghost, the form you see me in now.

"In time, Gnawthral's attempted takeover of Neopia faded from memory. But I never forgot. Just before my demise I managed to wrestle Vinsjin's diary from Gnawthral. I have kept it

ever since. I took it upon myself to safeguard the book and to watch out for a possible return of the ghouls to Neopia.

"In addition to his desire for domination over the land, Gnawthral also seeks revenge against me for his lengthy banishment."

Liva and Sarn stood silently for a moment. Then Liva spoke. "Why didn't you tell us any of this before?" she asked.

Kyrok sighed deeply. "Because I am responsible for Vinsjin's diary falling into Gnawthral's hands. I am responsible for the return of the ghouls and the danger now faced by Neopia. It was my job to guard the book and I have failed."

Kyrok paused for a moment to allow the full impact of his story to sink in. Then he continued. "I understand if you no longer want to go on this quest with me. After all, this whole mess is really my fault." He looked away.

Sarn glanced at Liva. He wasn't quite sure

what to say. All he knew was that he wanted to help Kyrok. "So where do we go next?" Sarn asked.

Kyrok looked right at the young Kacheek and smiled. Perhaps a more experienced warrior would judge him harshly for his failure, but Sarn's loyalty more than made up for his lack of experience. He was pleased with the companions fate had chosen to give him. And he had the feeling that they would see this quest through to the end.

"My guess is that Gnawthral has left the book behind, safely in his home in the Ice Caves of Terror Mountain," Kyrok explained. "That is where we must go next. If you are still willing to help me, that is."

"What are we waiting for?" Sarn asked, scrambling to his feet. "We've got to get to Terror Mountain!" He started walking at a brisk pace.

"Uh, Sarn," Kyrok shouted. Sarn paused. "It's this way." Kyrok pointed in the opposite

direction from the way Sarn had started.

"Oh," Sarn said. Then he giggled. Liva laughed, too.

"Thank you, my friends," said Kyrok. "Your help will not soon be forgotten!"

As Kyrok led the way, his thoughts turned to the coming journey to the frozen wastelands of Terror Mountain.

EPILOGUE

Gnawthral limped the last few steps along the icy face of Terror Mountain. Struggling through a raging blizzard, the leader of the ghouls finally stepped through the entrance to his home in the Ice Caves, safe at last from the biting wind and pelting sleet.

Several ghouls, his personal servants, rushed to his side and helped him walk to the cave's inner chamber. There, a fire roared beneath a large copper cauldron, its bottom

glowing bright orange as welcome heat radiated from the dancing flames.

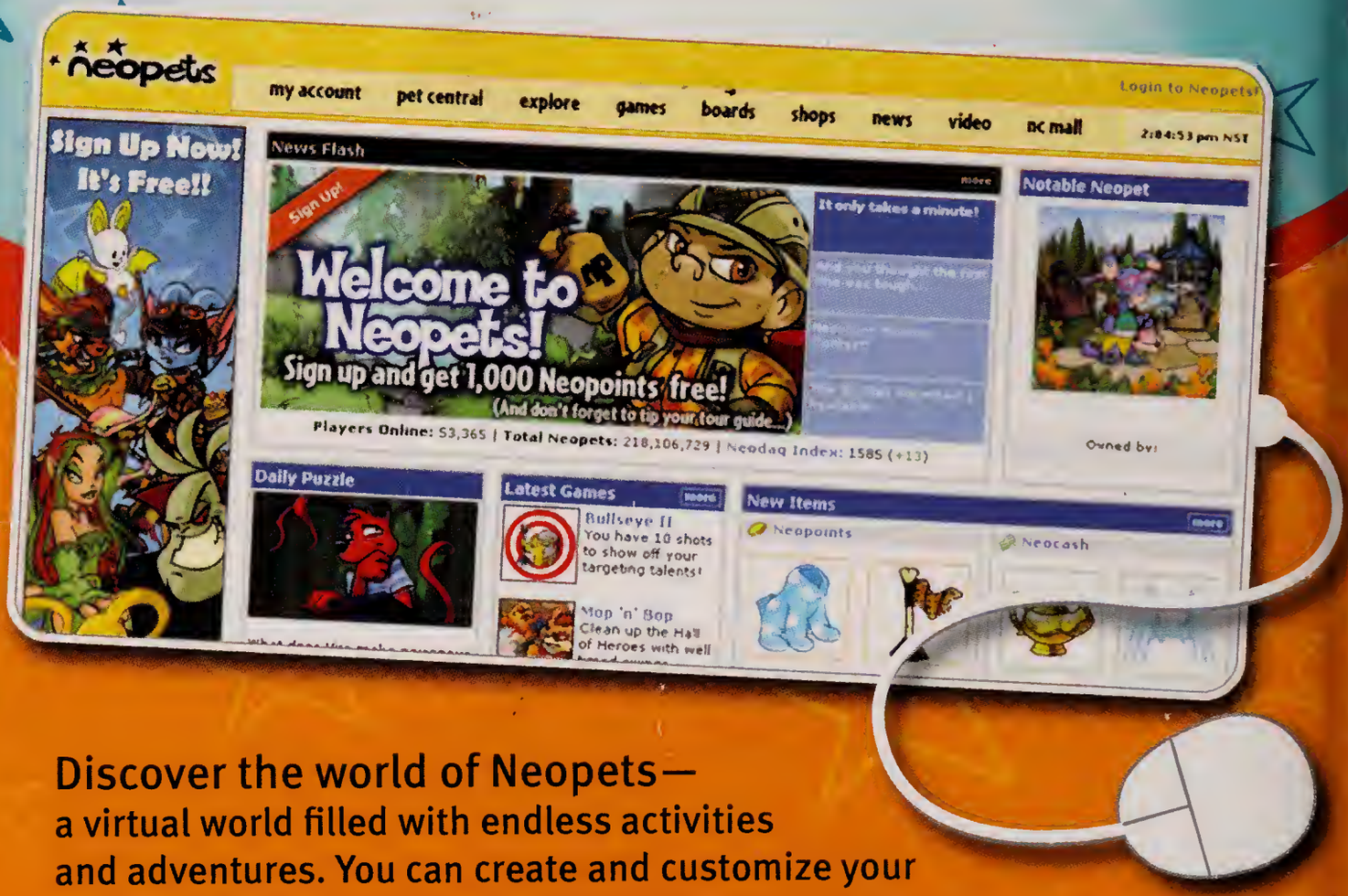
"Did you defeat the traitor, O Great One?" the servant finally asked.

"If I had, do you think I would have limped back here, battered and bruised, to nurse my wounds with the likes of you!" Gnawthral bellowed, tossing the empty cup at his servant. "I had hoped to eliminate Kyrok in the Haunted Woods and remove the main obstacle in my path to total domination of Neopia. But I know my old friend. He will follow me here. And when he does, I will surely destroy him!"

Something is awry in the land of Neopia!

The Creeping Danger, the first book in the Ghoul Catchers trilogy, chronicles the journey of two young heroes who set out to save their village.

With the help of their new friend, a ghost named Kyrok, will they be able to restore life to the drained and barren lands of Neopia?



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